

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

Please amend Claims 1, 14, and 20-22 and cancel Claims 12 and 13.

1. (Currently Amended) A method of preparing or modifying a cheese or cheese-like product comprising mixing into a cheesemaking mixture or product, a heat-killed ferment of an exopolysaccharide-producing-microorganism without separating the exopolysaccharide from the other components of the ferment, wherein the microorganism is selected from lactic acid bacteria.

2. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the heat-killed ferment is directly mixed into a cheesemaking mixture.

3. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the heat-killed ferment is mixed into an ingredient used in making the product.

4. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the heat-killed ferment is ferment prepared using a lactose-rich medium and an exopolysaccharide-producing-microorganism.

5. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the microorganism does not hydrolyse lactose, and the ferment comprises an added lactase or galactosidase enzyme or an organism which produces an enzyme which hydrolyses lactose.

6. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 4 wherein the medium contains more than 1.0% (w/v) lactose.

7. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 4 wherein the lactose-rich medium is a fraction of milk.

8. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 7 wherein the fraction is serum or mother liquor; or raffinate or breakthrough derived from milk or skim milk or buttermilk or whey or serum or mother liquor or permeate; or permeate derived from milk or skim milk or buttermilk or whey or serum or mother liquor or raffinate or breakthrough.

9. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the microorganism is a food-acceptable microorganism.

10. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 8 wherein the lactose-rich medium comprises a dairy permeate.

11. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 10 wherein the dairy permeate is a milk permeate or a whey permeate.

12. (Canceled)

13. (Canceled)

14. (Currently Amended) A method as claimed in claim 11 wherein the microorganism is selected from ~~Lactobacillus delbrueckii ssp bulgaricus; Lactococcus lactis ssp cremoris; Lactococcus lactis ssp lactis; Streptococcus salivarius ssp thermophilus; Lactobacillus casei ssp casei; Leuconostoc mesenteroides; lactobacillus helveticus; Lactobacillus reuteri; Lactobacillus rhamnosus; Lactobacillus plantarum and Lactobacillus sakei~~ Lactobacillus delbrueckii ssp bulgaricus; Lactococcus lactis ssp cremoris; Lactococcus lactis ssp lactis; Streptococcus salivarius ssp thermophilus; Lactobacillus casei ssp casei; Leuconostoc mesenteroides; Lactobacillus helveticus; Lactobacillus reuteri; Lactobacillus rhamnosus; Lactobacillus plantarum and Lactobacillus sakei.

15. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein fermentation is conducted at a temperature of 20-35°C.

16. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 14 wherein the fermentation is incubated for 16-240 hours.

17. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 15 wherein the mixture is fermentation incubated for 60-120 hours.

18. (Previously Presented) A method a claimed in claim 1 wherein the ferment is heated and spray dried.

19. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein ferment is heat-killed and mixed directly with a dairy product.

20. (Currently Amended) A method of modifying a milk protein concentrate comprising adding to the concentrate a heat-killed ferment of an exopolysaccharide-producing-microorganism without separating the exopolysaccharide from the other components of the ferment, wherein the microorganism is selected from lactic acid bacteria.

21. (Currently Amended) A method of preparing a cheese or cheese-like product comprising the steps of

- (a) adding to a cheese milk, a heat-killed ferment of an exopolysaccharide-producing-microorganism without separating the exopolysaccharide from the other components of the ferment, wherein the microorganism is selected from lactic acid bacteria;
 - (b) adding a proteolytic enzyme to the mixture;
 - (c) collecting the resulting curd;
 - (d) further processing the curd to produce a cheese or cheese-like product.
22. (Currently Amended) A process of preparing a cheese or cheese-like product comprising the steps of
- (a) providing a cheese precursor mixture comprising milk proteins
 - (b) adding to the cheese precursor mixture a heat killed ferment of an exopolysaccharide-producing-microorganism without separating the exopolysaccharide from the other components of the ferment, wherein the microorganism is selected from lactic acid bacteria
 - (c) providing conditions under which the product gels.
23. (Original) A method as claimed in claim 22 wherein the conditions of (c) are provided by cooking the mixture to denature milk proteins and allowing the mixture gel.
24. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the product is a cheese.
25. (Previously Presented) A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the product is a processed cheese.